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Ukrainian-Russian Historical, Cultural and Political Relations

Introduction

The Ukraine-Russian relationship has often been characterised by an complex interweaving of shared origins, divergent political trajectories and contested cultural legacies. Rooted in the medieval state of Kievan Rus', both nations have claimed the legacy of Kievan Rus' as an integral part of their source of statehood. But how the envelopment of a common ancestry became the rich integration of difference we see today reveals the push and pull of integration and autonomy, domination and resistance..

1.1 Historical Relations

1.1.1 The Legacy of Kievan Rus'

At the root of the historical confusion is Kievan Rus', the medieval empire of Slavic tribes from which both modern Ukraine and Russia trace their descent. The capital of the Rus' was the city of Kiev. Nevertheless, contrary to nationalist myths, Kievan Rus' was never a centralized or unified nation-state. Instead, it was a loose confederation with shifting alliances of competing dynasties and regions.[1]

During the 13th century the political centre of gravity all but moved from Kiev to Vladimir and then to Moscow following the Mongol invasion. This idea of a *translatio imperii* - the idea that political authority had moved from the south to the north - formed the ideological core of Muscovy's assertion to the Kievan inheritance. But this assertion was challenged. The western Galicia-Volhynia, approximately today's Ukraine, also claimed that heritage in dynastic, territorial and ecclesiastical terms.[2]

1.1.2 Divergence in State Formation

In the 14th century, Muscovy begun gradually consolidating power, developing into an autocratic state influenced by Byzantine and Mongol traditions.[3] By contrast the Ukrainian lands were politically incorporated into Lithuania and Poland. This divergence had far-reaching consequences for the nature of governance, law, and culture: Muscovy developed into centralized tsarist autocracy, while the Ukrainian lands retained a legacy of local self-government and Western legal codes.

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[1] cf. PELENSKI, J., *The Contest for the "Kievan Inheritance"*, in *Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter*, 4-5.
[2] cf. PELENSKI, J., *The Contest for the "Kievan Inheritance"*, in *Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter*, 6-14.
[3] cf. PELENSKI, J., *The Contest for the "Kievan Inheritance"*, in *Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter,*14.

The Union of Brest (1596), by which a faction of the Orthodox church in Ukraine came into communion with Rome, signified the growing religious and cultural distance between Ukraine and Muscovy. There were some instances of convergence, however. The best known such agreement is the Treaty of Pereiaslav (1654), in which Bohdan Khmelnytsky of Ukraine sought the protection of Poland's enemy, the Orthodox Tsar of Russia. Soviet historiography may have understood it as a "reunification", but the union was characterized by tensions and ambiguities around the matters of autonomy and sovereignty.[4]

1.2 Cultural Relations

1.2.1 Shared Roots and Divergence

Ukraine and Russia are rooted in Orthodox Christianity, Church Slavonic, and a Slavicized Byzantine cultural model. These elements served as codification of East Slavic national unity in the Middle Ages. But, in time, cultural divergence followed political severance. Ukrainian lands ruled by the Poles and Lithuanians, absorbed Western influences from the Catholic Church, Jesuit schools and the Latin legal system.

Where Russian culture turned increasingly to Byzantine autocracy and state orthodoxy, Ukrainian culture remained vernacular, localist, pluralist. This difference was especially marked in religious worship: Ukrainian Orthodoxy was more decentralized and preserved many of the liturgical practices and traditions outside the control of the Patriarch of Moscow. For their part, many Russian imperial agencies viewed this diversity as a danger, and they often sought to quash it through state action.

1.2.2 Language as Identity

Language, as cultural difference, is arguable the most problematic frontier. The Russian state has long denied that Ukrainian was a distinct language, calling it a "peasant dialect." But literature and linguistics are distinct. Legal bans on Ukrainian-language publications during the 19th century (another example of a Valuev Circular and Ems Ukaz) and the subsequent war on Ukrainian-language education in the USSR, all testify to the persisting fear of Ukrainian linguistic nationalism.

By contrast, a great number of Ukrainians internalized the Russian culture through education, literature, and political careerism. This complicated identity is what Malorosiistvo ("Little Russianism") refers to. These were Ukrainians who believed in Russian imperial values and who largely had been at odds with their fellow countrymen who had fought for independence. But their presence

[4] The Union of Brest-Litovsk, available at: https://stjosaphatugcc.org/full-text-of-the-union-of-brest.php, accessed 25/04/2025

served only to deepen a sense of the reach of Russian cultural hegemony and the persistence of Ukrainian identity beneath it.

1.3 Political Relations

1.3.1 The Hetmanate as a Struggle for Autonomy

In the 17th century, Ukraine remained part of the Russian Empire of Russia's Russian Crown, though having a special status (a semi-autonomous status), the Cossack Hetmanate. Though this autonomy was promised at first, it began to steadily erode as a result of the centralist policies of the Russian Empire. Under Peter I and Catherine II the Hetmanate was liquidated, its administrative apparatus transformed, and its elites transformed into provincial status.

The suppression of self-determination was matched by attempts to crush the Ukrainian church's independence, particularly through the subjection of the Kyiv Metropolitanate to Moscow. Such actions also follow a pattern in political affairs: Early alliance, before a series of stages of infiltration and control.[5]

1.3.2 Soviet era and Russification

The Soviet era only deepened this tendency. While Lenin acknowledged the right of Ukraine to self-determination, including the right of secession, in practice the USSR installed a severe policy of centralization, particularly under Stalin and Brezhnev. Ukrainians' culture and language had been forcibly subjugated under Russian rule.

The Russification in education, administration, and culture aimed to create a body of loyal subjects rather than just an ethnic minority. Even Ukrainian kindergartens were suddenly teaching in Russian, and Russian-language schools in Ukraine were disproportionately more funded and staffed than Ukrainian-language ones. Meanwhile, Ukrainians who lived in Russia didn't have the same access to Ukrainian-language education.

This disparity sowed resentment. As Yaroslav Bilinsky has written, Russification was so intense that a Ukrainian intellectual and polyglot, who knew ten languages, was reprimanded in Kyiv after he was overheard using his native language in public—a potent metaphor for how state policy perverted as much Ukrainian resistance as Russian cultural authenticity.[6]

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[5] cf. HANS-JOACHIM, T., *The Unloved Alliance: Political Relations between Muscovy and Ukraine in the Seventeenth Century*, in Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter. 39-68.

[6] cf. BILINSKY, Y., *Political Relations Between Russians and Ukrainians in the USSR: The 1970s and Beyond*, in Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter, 185-187.

1.3.3 Post-Soviet Tensions

In the post-Soviet period, historical grudges resurged. Formed in 1991, Ukraine was born as a nation while it was under Russia's informal dominance. But the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the ensuing war in Eastern Ukraine, point to an even more fundamental, unresolved issue: Whether Ukraine can find a path independent of Russia, or whether it is condemned to always be within Moscow's orbit.[7]

According to Bilinsky "authentic cooperation" depends on Russia's acceptance of Ukrainian independence, politically, culturally and psychologically and not just formally. Without that recognition, Ukraine's resistance to domination will be sustained, and the mutual hostility will continue.

Conclusion

In the changing world Ukraine and Russia experienced a legacy of mutually interlinked paradoxes in their historical, cultural and political connections, entwined by an asymmetry and discord that never ceased and remains until now. From the heritages of Kievan Rus' and of Muscovy's imperium, through coerced unions to accompanied Russification, the Ukrainian-Russian collision shows more than anti-geopolitical hatred. It's a searing account of the ways in which myth, memory and power determine the destinies of nations.

Hence, the modern task is to break with this historical determinism. Relations, however, will not advance on any front until Russia begins to see Ukraine as more than a cultural stepchild or political appendage and as a sovereign equal. Until then, the long and painful history of their meeting will continue to reverberate into the future.

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[7] cf. OLEKSANDRA D., *Reclaiming Identity: Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Ukraine's Post-Soviet Counter-Narrative*, 2024/2025 at https://thesis.unipd.it/handle/20.500.12608/83984. accessed 25/04/2025.

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